

"A Sense of Urgency"

Mark 1:9-15

February 22, 2015

First Sunday in Lent

We are often impatient people in the 21st century. We always seem to be in a hurry to get stuff. We want what we want or need immediately (if not sooner). We don't want to wait and are frustrated when we have to wait. For example, microwave ovens were invented to cook food faster than a conventional oven. Yet one man was observed to be standing in front of a microwave oven saying, while his coffee was reheating, "Hurry up! I don't have all minute!"

St. Mark had much in common with a 21st century man. In writing the Gospel that bears his name, he always seemed to be in a hurry. He's a big fan of the word "immediately". He uses it 41 times in his short Gospel. He's always trying to move the story along to get to the most important thing. It's "immediately" this and "immediately" that. He writes everything with a great sense of urgency.

Our text today shows the first appearance of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. There is nothing in Mark about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem or any star followed by Magi from the east. Mark has no time for that. He wants to get on to something more important: Jesus' public ministry. This starts with Jesus' baptism where He identifies with each and every person. He who became like one of us in His incarnation now takes our place in His baptism. After being baptized, Jesus "immediately" sees confirmation of His status as Savior: the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends on Him like a dove, and the Father's voice from heaven declares Jesus to be His beloved Son. Jesus is ready to begin His work for us.

Mark has no time to lollygag around here. The Spirit "immediately" drives Jesus out into the wilderness, the habitation of evil spirits according to Jewish tradition. Jesus is there so quickly to confront our number one enemy. It is not poverty or greed or violence or anything else. It is the devil.

The devil had begun his work thousands of years earlier when he tempted Adam and Eve into sin and away from God. And they listened to the devil's temptation and did it. He has done the same to you, to me, and to every human being who has ever lived. He has tempted each of us into sin and away from God. As with Adam and Eve, he has succeeded.

Many think that this is no big deal - only some sort of moral failure which doesn't seem very serious. However, sin is actually a life or death matter. Sin cuts us off from God who is the source of life for each of us. This means that sin means death for anyone who commits it. You cannot prevent death, avoid death, or keep death from occurring to you. And don't forget that death is more than simply the stopping of your brain activity and heart beating as you fade away into nothingness or a "better place". There is eternal death in the torment of hell after the physical death here on earth.

It's no wonder that Mark wanted to hurry things along to get to this event. We have failed in our battle against the devil and his temptations again and again. Now Jesus will take our place and do battle against the devil in our place and for our benefit. Mark doesn't say too much about HOW Jesus was tempted like Matthew and Luke do in their accounts of this story (Remember – he's in a hurry!). He does make it clear that Jesus was tempted continuously in every way possible for forty days.

The good news for us is that Jesus won this battle. The writer to the Hebrews confirms this when he says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15) This is no personal achievement for Jesus. He did it only and all for you. The fancy theological term for this is Jesus' "active obedience." Jesus actively obeyed all of God's Law for us, resisting every temptation of the devil to the contrary. Since He was acting as our substitute, His obedience is credited to our account before God. That means that, instead of letting the devil beat you up with guilt and despair over all the times that you have given in to his temptations, you can claim Jesus' perfect victory as your victory because that's how God sees it.

But that's not all there is. Even though you have Jesus' perfect obedience on your side, there is still the debt to be paid for all of your failings. Mark knows that and is once again in a hurry to show how Jesus took care of that. With a "immediately" this and an "immediately" that and an "immediately" this AND that, Mark whooshes through the rest of Jesus' public ministry in only nine chapters to get to Holy Week when Jesus resolved the problem of our debt of disobedience to God.

Unlike the other gospels, Jesus seems hurry to Jerusalem for this last week. He seems to hurry to the cross, offering no resistance to the unfairness of the trial, the illegitimacy of His arrest, and the horror of His punishment. It's what's called Jesus' "passive obedience". Jesus, although He had all power as the Son of God and could have done anything, passively allowed Himself to be sacrificed on that cross as payment for the sin of the world, for your sin, and for my sin.

Jesus even hurried back to life. Barely in the tomb for 36 hours, Jesus came back to life and left the tomb, as proof that God had indeed accepted Jesus' perfect sacrifice for sin. All was now accomplished. All was complete. Jesus defeated the devil and his temptations through His obedience in the desert on our behalf. Jesus completed His victory over the devil and his temptations by His death and resurrection in Jerusalem during what we call Holy Week.

Jesus eagerly gives us the wonderful benefits of His victory through very simple means. And He does it in a hurry. He gives you baptism in which you immediately become a child of God with all the rights and privileges (including His holiness) that go with it. There is no probation period or waiting time of any kind. You are His child right away and remain His child always.

He gives you His Word by which you immediately have the forgiveness for all your sins. You don't have to earn it or prove your sincerity. God's Word has the power to create what it pledges and gives what it promises. In His Word – read, preached, or pronounced – you always have the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross, no matter how often the sin or how big the sin.

He gives you Holy Communion by which you immediately have peace and assurance. You don't have to be able to prove Jesus' body or blood is there with the bread and the wine, nor do you

have to explain how it happens. In the Supper, you are united with Christ and with one another as you eat His body and drink His blood in faith.

Does this mean temptations never happen, always go away, or become easy for us to overcome? No, not at all. Satan refuses to admit defeat, but keeps on fighting against us. However, in addition to Jesus' immediate victory over the devil in the desert and His immediate victory over the devil on the cross, Jesus offers us immediate help in our daily struggle with temptation. He taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." Dr. Luther explained this petition in this way, "We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice."

That's a very fine sounding prayer. Does God hear and answer that prayer? Most assuredly. In that verse to the Hebrews, where the author assures us that Jesus was tempted but did not sin, he says that, because of this, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

We need not worry or fear the devil and his temptations against us. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor. 10:13) That way of escape is not your best efforts at resisting or overcoming temptation on your own. That way of escape is Jesus. Trust His victory over the devil and temptation as being your own. Trust His victory over sin and death as being your own. And you will have victory: victory over temptation; victory over sin; and victory over death – immediately! Amen